

June 17, 2005- West Virginia Day

West Virginia Day

This June 20th, as we celebrate West Virginia Day, we also celebrate our heritage as West Virginians and explore what it means to be citizens of our great state.

The distinctiveness of West Virginia can be traced to its unique formation, as the only state to have been formed as a direct result of the Civil War. In a reaction to Virginia's overrepresentation of eastern planters in the state legislature, on June 11, 1861, delegates from Virginia's western counties met to nullify Virginia's secession from the Union. Fifty counties (except for present-day Mineral, Grant, Lincoln, Mingo, and Summers County) constituted the newly formed state and served as the genesis of the vibrant and diverse place we know today as West Virginia.

The Constitution of West Virginia was approved in April, 1862, and in May of 1863, Arthur I. Boreman became our first governor. By June 20, 1863, West Virginia was officially a sovereign state. The sheer beauty of West Virginia is a stark and welcome contrast to the ugly conflict from which it was born.

Since its inception, West Virginia has been blessed by an abundance of natural resources and a striking environment, placing it in a league all its own. The West Virginia State Motto -- *Montani semper liberi* - "Mountaineers are always free," sums up our powerful love of liberty and pays homage to our beautifully rugged landscape.

The West Virginia outdoors offer plentiful opportunities for exploration in 37 state parks, 9 state forests and 2 national forests, which collectively protect more than one million acres of pristine wilderness. From hiking to rock-climbing to skiing to whitewater rafting, West Virginia offers an unbeatable combination of activities for people of all ages and abilities to enjoy.

Besides possessing abundant natural resources that draw tourists from around the globe, West Virginia has also produced world-class public servants who have worked and continue to work to secure a bright and prosperous future for our great state. Senator Robert C. Byrd, in particular, has an exemplary record of service and distinction working to advance West Virginia's interests. This record of service will be told in the new autobiography, "Robert C. Byrd: Child of the Appalachian Coalfields," to be released by WVU Press on Monday, June 20th. This West Virginia Day, we should reflect on our excellent public servant who has done so much for our great state.

Currently serving his eighth consecutive term in the U.S. Senate, Senator Byrd has the distinction today of holding more Senate positions of leadership and casting more votes than any other Senator in history. In addition, Senator Byrd holds the record for the longest uninterrupted term of service in the U.S. Senate, among his many other accomplishments.

In 1946 Senator Byrd first won a seat in the state legislature, becoming a member of the West Virginia House of

Delegates from 1947 to 1951. Senator Byrd then was elected to the West Virginia Senate and served from 1951 to 1953, followed by the U.S. House of Representatives from 1953 to 1959. Senator Byrd was first elected to the U.S. Senate in 1958, where he continues to serve today. Incredibly, Senator Byrd has never lost an election, and continues to serve as a symbol of tireless work and energy and a source of pride for all West Virginians. Every other state in the nation surely wishes they had as good a friend as West Virginia has in Robert C. Byrd.

Senator Byrd's strong set of values and personal beliefs shine through in every aspect of his life and help guide his career in public service. Senator Byrd's devotion to his family is well known, and recently, he and his wife, Erma, celebrated their 68th wedding anniversary. Even politicians who might not agree with Senator Byrd politically have expressed their admiration for his graciousness and devotion to others. On May 26, 2005, Republican Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska spoke of Senator Byrd when he said: "After 68 years, Erma and Robert still have the deep and abiding friendship that began in Beckley, WV; the love of their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren; and the respect of all of us in the Senate. I know of no other Senator who has celebrated over 50 years of service in Congress, and as I said before, there is no other Senator who could say he celebrated 68 years of marriage. It is an overwhelming accomplishment and really a credit to both Robert and Erma."

Senator Byrd has also won the respect of West Virginia through his invaluable service, which has enriched our great state many times over. His work has brought dams, bridges, schools, and countless other public projects to West Virginia which allowed us to thrive. His tireless efforts have guided West Virginia into a position of advantage for the 21st century and provided us with the tools we need to flourish. Senator Byrd's peerless public service has garnered him such respect and faith from the people of West Virginia that on several occasions he won all 55 West Virginia counties in his bid for re-election. In fact, most recently in the 2000 election Senator Byrd won all but seven of the state's 1,970 precincts.

In a tribute to his dedicated and outstanding record of service, in 2001 Senator Byrd was honored by both houses of the West Virginian Legislature as the "West Virginian of the 20th Century" and he is well on his way to becoming the West Virginian of the 21st Century. This West Virginia Day, it is only fitting to celebrate not only the strength and beauty of the great state of West Virginia but also our superb public servants like Senator Robert C. Byrd.